

# Marketplace

**Christoph Grohe**

Christoph Grohe is Swiss, and a familiar figure in the international old-car world. On first meeting, you might take him for a prosperous lawyer or an architect. Neatly dressed in a smart blue blazer and shiny shoes, he speaks softly in perfect English and drives a top-of-the-range BMW.

Underneath it all, though, he is a real enthusiast with a particular passion for what we would call Oily Rag cars. Now in his early 50s, he started dealing as a teenager. "The first car I bought at the age of 17 was an MGA, partly financed by my grandmother, and I sold it to buy an Aston Martin DB2/4."

The first car he sold when he established his business officially was an Alvis Graber coupé. Since then he has kept moving steadily upmarket. "I like to turn over maybe 30 cars a year," he told us during a recent visit. "And I don't mind waiting – every car finds a buyer in the end if it is unusual enough and the price is right."

Unusual is the key word. We spent a day with him in Geneva and saw only part of his stock, but the range extended from Veteran (a neat little Panhard et Levassor, already spoken for) to Classic (an early, delightfully mellow Jaguar E-type coupé). His favourites are quality marques of every era which have been, since new, in the hands of well-heeled Swiss families, as exemplified by another lovely Graber-bodied Alvis, an immaculate drophead which he has no intention of selling.

Like the man himself, his premises are unassuming. Cars which are undergoing initial assessment, recommissioning or freshening-up are housed in a spacious workshop where Daniel Racine, his full-time mechanic, presides. That was where we encountered a 1946 rear-engined Tatra Type 87 V-8 saloon which he

had just acquired from a Swedish museum. Complete, it was clearly very tired, with a stuck engine and seized rack and pinion. As Christoph himself admitted, "This is a car to restore fully or leave alone as static sculpture – nothing in-between would be appropriate."

Nearby stood a real rarity, a 1938 Renault Viva Grand Sport drophead two-seater plus dicky. An abandoned restoration project, it had arrived, we were told, packed up in boxes. It had since been assembled roughly so that a potential purchaser could see exactly what he was taking on, and very impressive it looked with its florid lines and over-the-top Art Déco interior. These unusual big Renaults are a particular interest of Christoph's. Two years ago at Rétromobile he showed a Nervasport 4.8-litre straight-eight drophead (the present cabriolet is a 4.1-litre six), wonderfully Oily Rag, which had been in the same French family all its life.

Half an hour's drive from the workshop, a sizeable warehouse with glazed steel doors all along one side serves as a showroom. Here we were shown first a very early Fiat 500 Topolino, again partly dismantled (the engine, evidently rebuilt, was in the passenger compartment) but clearly full of charm and potential. Next to it, a Swiss-registered Alvis TA14 shooting brake, or woodie, caught our eye. With a delightful original interior, it had clearly been very well looked after and was, Christoph told us, ready to drive away.

By way of complete contrast to all of the above, a huge Hispano-Suiza H6B landaulet de ville – ie, with a leather folding hood over the rear-most passenger seat as well as the chauffeur's compartment – dwarfed everything else on show, its elegant Franay coachwork gleaming in the half-light.

Next to it stood a 1951 Alfa Romeo 1900 four-door saloon in



This Voisin C11, in barn find condition, is typical of Christoph Grohe's unusual stock

near-new condition. Our recent article on these cars by Anthony Pritchard (January, 2013, issue) alerted many readers to what had become, in saloon form, virtually a forgotten model – very expensive when new, Mille Miglia-eligible and comparable in certain respects with Lancias of the same era. This one had been repainted at some time in green over its factory dark blue paint, but the original cloth interior had survived (as far as we could tell) under later plastic covers in possibly perfect condition. The car had been fitted when new with an Abarth engine conversion, taking its performance to a level that was to become standard soon after.

Waiting for us at the end of the row was one of those Vintage barn finds we all dream about, a Voisin C11 saloon with lightweight four-door, six-seater factory coachwork. Belgian-registered, it had come from a deceased's estate and been put to one side, Grohe told us, for exhibition at Rétromobile next year. Though battered and well worn, this delightful little 2.3-litre sleeve-valve car looked complete, though its six-cylinder engine was

partly disassembled with the individual cylinder heads in a box alongside. Much of the glass had gone, the headlamps were of Belgian make and, though handsome enough, clearly not original and Voisin's distinctive luggage boxes and auxiliary lighting arrangements were not all in place.

The famous *cocotte* mascot was present, however, and the interior, though scruffy and in plain cloth rather than one of the jazz-age designs favoured by Voisin, looked restorable. The instrument panel was complete. Even the exterior paint, it seemed to us, would clean up sufficiently to pass muster on Oily Rag parade.

Christoph Grohe prefers to discuss prices privately, though indicative figures are available on his website. He is happy to meet visitors by arrangement at Geneva airport. He can be reached by telephone on 00 412 18 07 35 65 or email: [info@christophgrohe.com](mailto:info@christophgrohe.com). You can scan his website, [www.christophgrohe.com](http://www.christophgrohe.com), for his current stock. He admits, however, that new acquisitions do sometimes take time to get there... **DEB**

**Left** This 1946 Tatra T87 emerged recently from decades in a Swedish museum **Centre** The 1938 Renault Viva Grand Sport **Right** Fiat Topolino is one of the earliest survivors

